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## Achieving moralised compassion in Higher Education

Maginess, T., & MacKenzie, A. (2018). Achieving moralised compassion in Higher Education. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 6(3), 42-48. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v6i3.370>

### **Published in:**

Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

### **Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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# JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

## Achieving Moralised Compassion in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

This paper engages with a philosophical conception of *moralised* compassion. This involves imaginative dwelling on the condition of the other person, an active regard for her good, and a view of her as a fellow human being. We will suggest that we ought, following Schopenhauer, to cultivate moralised compassion if we are to have just relations and just institutions. This will enable us to consider compassion not just as a private interpersonal value, but as a broader institutional and global value. Many universities still proclaim a three-stranded mission: to educate for personal development, to create public/societal benefit, and to prepare students for the labour market. There is an emerging set of voices critically questioning what they see as an overly dominant obsession with training students to serve the economy, and that universities are increasingly focused on the private, rather than the public good. We will reflect on meanings and enactments of compassion within the 'engaged' university by asking a number of related questions. We will explore how universities can offer leadership on moralised compassion, both at an individual and institutional level to their students, and how teachers can offer a more culturally sustaining pedagogy to their students, which values and defends cultural pluralism and cultural equality. One way in which we might cultivate compassionate regard is to use the embodied experiences and suggestive capacities of literature to [re]imagine or [re]conceive beliefs or attitudes, to cultivate perception, discernment and responsiveness. The paper concludes by proposing some practical suggestions on how moralised compassion might inflect and inform creative interconnections and interdependency between universities at a global level.

**Keywords:** Moralised compassion; 'other'; interreading; interculturality; literature.

### Introduction

In this paper we reflect upon meanings and enactments of moralised compassion within higher education. Drawing predominantly from moral philosophy, we begin by offering a brief account of the constituent elements of compassion, and of moralised compassion in particular. We then look briefly at the mission and values of universities in the contemporary world, and suggest how the concept of moralised compassion might be situated and embodied within the context of higher education. We conclude by offering some practical suggestions about how moralised compassion might inflect and inform innovative interconnections and interdependency between universities at a global level.

### The constituents of moralised compassion

Compassion, "independent of all ulterior considerations" is, following Schopenhauer (2007, p. 144), the real basis of "all satisfaction and all well-being and happiness" for it is exclusively this emotion "that is the real basis of voluntary justice and genuine loving kindness". Schopenhauer's claim allows us to begin setting moralised compassion apart from compassion, since it is commonly assumed that compassion has an inherent moral orientation: it does, but not categorically so. Compassion can involve distorted judgments, result in more harm than good if it stifles another's flourishing, and be susceptible to bias towards in-groups, friends and those like us; contingent evaluations that focus on non-moral features such as, for example, sex, colour, or accent (Hoffman, 2000). Moralised compassion extends not only to those whom we know and love, or who look and sound like us, but also, non-contingently, to people distant from us in terms of class, race, religion, ethnicity, custom or sexual orientation. The aim in educating for moralised compassion is to help develop non-contingent evaluative judgments of the grounds that merit our compassion.

Moralised compassion is an altruistic emotion that arouses desire for the good of the other person and whose wellbeing we take to be an important part of one's own flourishing (Nussbaum, 2000). The 'object' of compassion is a person suffering from harm, difficulty, or danger in ways that are critical to the wellbeing of that person, or classes of persons such as the poor or those marginalised by society. But what are the constituent elements of compassion? It is a complex emotion, involving evaluative judgments, and consisting in three constituent elements that we can only briefly delineate here: scale, blamelessness and similar possibilities. The first element consists of what Aristotle called 'size'. The 'size' of the eliciting condition for compassion means that the harm is serious, rather than trivial or irritating, causing hardship, affliction or distress. As great art has borne witness over time and place, the size, variety and quality of misfortune that afflict human beings are many, and include ill-treatment, discrimination, prejudice, illness, loneliness, sexual abuse, themes universal and recursive, and to which we will return later.

The second element is concerned with blamelessness, and this element brings out the complexity of the emotion. In feeling moralised compassion, we judge that the person, howsoever placed, does not deserve the suffering because circumstances beyond her/his control threaten her/his wellbeing. Even where the person is at fault, and elicits reproach, we can still feel compassion if the size of suffering is out of proportion to the fault. The character, Supatrik, in Mukherjee's novel, *The Lives of Others* (2015), is tortured and murdered by the Indian state for helping brutally exploited farmers in rural Bengal escape from oppression. Here, our evaluation of Supatrik's condition is directed to the non-blameworthy features of his circumstances – extreme hardship, capture, torture and murder, rather than to his situation as a whole: that he is from a middle class family, is well-educated and chose to join violent extremists. We may abhor that he murders landlords to save farmers and their families from destitution and slavery, but we can surely feel compassion at the thought of his helplessness against the brute facts of entrenched injustice (and admiration for his courage, despite the hopelessness of his task), and the viciousness with which he is treated.

The third element of compassion is the judgment of 'similar possibilities'. Similar possibilities mean, in part, an acceptance of one's own weakness and vulnerabilities, that harm is as likely to happen to me as to anyone else. We can feel compassion for a grieving student whose mother has passed away. Knowing her values, beliefs, or outlook, and the intensity of her daughter's love, we can reconstruct her grief by imagining what she is going through (and, inevitably, how we would react were our mother to die). This is not to suggest that we need to know people in person to feel compassion for them or to act justly. If that were the case, we would not respond to characters in a novel or movements such as 'Black Lives Matter' or '#MeToo'. Grief, in any case, is an emotion to which we are all vulnerable.

Without this awareness of similar possibilities, we will be immune to the hardships of others, prone to dehumanising constructions that justify our ill-treatment or neglect, as we have witnessed with, for example, the plight of migrants, the clerical abuse of children, and which the 'Black Lives Matter' and '#MeToo' movements have forced us to confront with respect to systematic racism and violence, and sexual harassment and assault – in the universities as well as in Hollywood. The similar possibilities judgment is supported by 'imaginative dwelling' (Blum, 1980) on the distress the other is experiencing: it is person-focused, not condition focused (though we can feel indignation that claims of racist violence and sexual harassment are not taken seriously by law enforcement or employers, or that farmers can be kept in perpetual destitution). Moralised compassion is about recognising the injustice of the other's situation, not just in personal terms (blamelessness), but about our responsibility, structurally, in the historical construction of that injustice when we fail, at the very least, to question why discrimination, abuse, and so on, exist. Expanding our imaginative capacities can expand our capacity for compassion, and the arts are well known for their capacity to expand our imagination, as we will shortly discuss. In taking the wellbeing of another as an important part of one's own flourishing, we are more likely to be compassionate because we take the other further into our own circle of concern, making ourselves vulnerable (by which we mean 'open') to the other. This is moralised compassion: non-contingent compassionate regard for another *as* a human being, however situated.

Compassion is also linked to other emotions such as love and sympathy, or anger and indignation when they are aroused by perceived injustices. In compassion, we recognise others as distinct, autonomous beings whose welfare we value as one of our own important ends. This attitude is different from the evaluative judgments of pity, an emotion that can be confused with compassion. In feeling pity, we hold ourselves apart from the distressed person, judging that her condition, though it has size, is inevitable, and that her position is one of inferiority (Solomon, 1993). Pity can arouse condescension and feelings of superiority. Compassion, by contrast, sees the person's misfortune 'as deviating from the general conditions of human flourishing' (Blum, p. 512). In perceiving another's need, we are motivated to alleviate the suffering, not for egoistic reasons, but because we value the other person's wellbeing and capacity to flourish as an end in itself, an intrinsic good. Nurturing moralised compassion can aid us in acting well, in promoting the right affective attitude so that we have an attitude of respect towards others.

Moralised compassion, then, is an acknowledgement of our shared humanity. It can promote the experience of equality, even while recognising that social inequality is a hard fact of social existence. Moralised compassion requires, ideally, that we be contextually attuned, as well informed as we can be, able to judge issues of moral salience, and to be responsibly concerned. It requires us, in addition, to be discerning of, and sensitive to, the other person's understanding and interpretation of events, and her special vulnerabilities, anxieties and fears, which insensitive, prejudiced or ignorant responses inhibit; everyday failures of imagination. Moralised compassion entails having respect for the other's dignity, and treating her/his personhood with a degree of respect comparable to respect for ourselves. Acting towards others appropriately, treating as irrelevant their appealing or unattractive qualities, and avoiding self-absorption, incuriosity or vicarious possession are a demanding set of tasks. The challenge for Higher Education is in achieving a disposition and an orientation that moralised compassion requires.

## Higher Educational Institutions and moralised compassion

### The roles of universities

Many universities still proclaim a three-stranded mission: to prepare students for the labour market (serving the economy); to educate for personal development (the civilising mission) and to create public/societal benefit, locally, nationally and perhaps even globally. The vision statement for Queen's University, Belfast, is to support 'outstanding students and staff' in 'conducting leading-edge education and research', that is 'focused on the needs of society'. The mission statement of the University of Glasgow is not dissimilar: 'To bring inspiring people together and create a world-class environment for learning and research, empowering staff and



students to discover and share knowledge *that can change the world*’; while the University of Edinburgh claims to make a ‘significant, sustainable and socially responsible contribution to the world’. A quick glance at the mission statements of the UK’s leading universities reveal similar aspirations and moral focus: to create excellent learning and research environments, in which all can thrive for the benefit of *society and the world* (own italics).

Nevertheless, and despite the aspirational statements, in the academic community there is an emerging set of voices critically questioning what they see as an overly dominant obsession with training students to serve the economy (Waddington, 2016; Collini, 2012; Barnett, 2011). Scholars have argued that universities, especially in the more prosperous global ‘north’, are increasingly focused on the private rather than public good. Thus, universities are seen as serving the hegemony of a corporatist and neo-liberal global agenda. Within that hegemony, universities are viewed as complicit in what has been termed ‘the commodification of education’ (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011). Barros (2012) argues that the tendencies of ‘wild’ capitalism, ‘casino’ capitalism and ‘platform’ capitalism are contributing to what is already a huge increase in the socioeconomic divide at a global level. To counter the absorption of universities into such a dehumanising enterprise, academics are calling for new paradigms, variously defined, but which may be generalised as ‘the engaged university’; that is to say, the university which connects with wider society and engages with the key concerns of that society (Ellison & Eatman, 2008). The challenge is how to structurally and practically connect personal development and public benefit with the current focus on marketable skills.

Scholars, especially those working with oppressed and marginalised learners and those involved in community and international development, are calling for a much broader understanding of ‘knowledge’ through which we might learn to develop our humanity, to recognise global inequality and to enact a principled response to it in which personal development is not just an individual privatised acquisition of knowledge. Rather, knowledge is a gift to be shared with both global and local forms of active and collaborative citizenship valuing indigenous and experiential learning.

It may be argued that the most primary enactment of being an engaged university is to exercise a moralised compassion at the level of access. In our own time, the aspirations of the UK 1948 Education Act, which widened greatly the franchise for people from less privileged background, seem a distant dream, as political policy making in the last thirty or forty years has become increasingly recusant.

The withdrawal of ‘grants’ or, what amounts to the same thing, the imposition of tuition fees, is the starkest instrument in a so called ‘reform’ which has seen the underrepresentation of minorities and disadvantaged groups in higher education in many parts of the United Kingdom barely improve in the ‘top’ universities (Pells, 2017; Woodham, 2017). Universities may respond with some asperity and point out that it is not they who set the policies, but governments. And, it may be noted that universities in places like China, despite rigid professions of rigid equality, have been accused of operating brazen forms of unequal access along economic, social and geographical dividing lines (Wang, 2010). The complex funding arrangements between universities and governments within a neoliberal ideology make it, arguably, more difficult for universities to assert public good, equality of access and moralised compassion, as the core value.

### Enacting moralised compassion: The engaged university

#### General principles

We must begin by acknowledging that some students report bruising or unsympathetic encounters with the ‘System’, perceiving the university as a system, somehow closed to them, even when they do get across the threshold – which for some is a momentous achievement in itself. How might all university staff, then, embody moralised compassion – identifying with the ‘other’ person? We would argue that an imaginative dwelling in the life of the student is crucial. This might begin to challenge the common label of ‘difficult student’ and reimagine the reality as an individual ‘student in difficulties’. Moralised compassion means, in practice, a capacious outlook where administrative staff work creatively and resourcefully together with student services and academics to figure out how individual students might achieve equal access, on their own terms, where the just rights of the individual are recognised and respected and where the individual’s difficulties are compassionately listened to. This is no easy matter; thousands of students must be ‘processed’, taught and supervised in their research. And, as was noted above, some students may have exhibited behaviours which are reckless or irresponsible, confrontational or disrespectful, and some are, perhaps, cunningly and cynically trying to ‘play the system’. Staff must balance the constituents of moralised compassion: size, blamelessness and the judgment of similar possibilities. And, in enacting compassion, they must also be just to others, taking into account the extent to which, in extending compassion to one student (or colleague), they may be failing to consider the valour of others who have not disclosed perhaps even more grievous difficulties.

Given that the first point of contact for students will often be administrative staff, it is vital that senior managers inculcate a culture among so-called ‘support staff’ which is welcoming and problem solving, rather than irritated and bureaucratic. And, that senior managers imaginatively dwell a little in the personhood of those frontline staff, offering support and guidance in determining a sensitised and nuanced enactment of moralised compassion.

In the past twenty years, universities in the UK have made great progress, especially in terms of making universities more accessible and welcoming to students living with disabilities. The Funding Council for Higher Education (2018) reported that 56% more students with a known disability and 220% more students with a known mental health condition have entered full-time first degree





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courses since 2010-11<sup>1</sup>. It may be said that policy and practice, albeit often driven by people living with disabilities and their carers, is a good example of moralised compassion in action. It is crucial that these advances are not adulterated by neoliberal managerial imperatives which view the provision of support to students and staff primarily in terms of cost. Universities should be the crucible for the practical testing of leading edge approaches to inclusion, showing society how universities can benefit society rather than being perceived as elite institutions for competitive, individualistic people intent primarily on wealth and power.

In this short paper, we must confine our attention to how moralised compassion might operate in relation to academics as teachers and to students as learners. We acknowledge that the exercise of moralised compassion in the domain of research is a topic of huge significance and we can only very briefly touch on it here. In qualitative research, for example, participatory research methods are emerging as an influential and socially just approach to involving voices normally excluded or marginalised by traditional research approaches. In response to international human rights instruments, such as Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) and Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD, 2006), some researchers are avowedly giving young people's voices, opinions and experiences 'due weight' on matters that affect them (see for example, Lundy, 2018; Maguire, Byrne, & Kehoe, 2018): they, not their caregivers, parents or teachers, are designing, informing, and participating in research about them. Hearing directly from children and young people is more likely to increase our compassionate regard for their experiences. We also acknowledge that the many people who work for universities in other capacities are also excluded from the present discussion.

### Academic teachers

Within teaching, compassion must be part of an outlook which creates a warm welcome and a door to understanding to all students, acknowledging that they too were once students, thus imaginatively identifying with the constituent of similar possibilities. More specifically, teachers need to be nuanced and engaged, not just about their subject, but as communicators. This implies that teachers, too, might wish to consider how easy or difficult the learning might be for students with disabilities, from non-traditional academic backgrounds and experience, for students who come from vastly different cultures and those who have had especial struggles to gain entry to university. Teachers could form a leading edge in the delivery of the engaged and compassionate university offering a culturally sustaining pedagogy which values and defends pluralism and cultural equality and which, contingently, promotes social and economic equality and interculturality as defined, for example, by Kramsch (2013) as openness to and understanding of other cultures. Thus, teachers can, even in the classroom, deliver that mission of the university which has to do with benefiting society. Moralised compassion is a strong and flexible conceptual tool to help achieve this.

Moreover, critical reflection on pedagogy has, in the past, enabled people, especially oppressed people, to recognise the processes by which they are 'othered' and rendered subaltern and to resist that process as best they might (Harman & Varja-Dobai, 2012). As teachers, we might, therefore, question our own privileged positioning (Duckworth & Tummons, 2010), moving from critical to transformative pedagogy. Moralised compassion offers a process through which teachers can become aware of how othered and alienated some of their students are; and how their unquestioned and unreflecting stances as teachers can contribute to that alienation.

### Students

Conversely, how can students afford moralised compassion to teachers and administrators and to the world beyond the university? Now, we are more likely to hear the beat of consumer rights; a rhythm set in motion by a broader ideological shift towards neoliberalism. This is not unrelated to the current representation of education as a commodity, as noted earlier. Students pay high fees and are, therefore, apt to view their relationship with universities as contractual and to focus, contingently, on how the university can train them for success in the labour market. So how can students be encouraged to consider a conception like moralised compassion? Students could be asked to work on comparative 'case studies' or 'real world' examples which are not from their local purview, but from the global south. Technology might also play a part in, for example, bringing medical students from India together with students from Durham or New York to consider a topic such as obesity or dementia. Students from the west and global north might be more likely to become critical thinkers and to question not just the extraordinarily privileged conditions in which they live, but also to learn resourcefulness and the validity of entirely different cultural attitudes, in which moralised compassion might exert a much stronger influence. Students from the global north and south could be encouraged to work collaboratively on a wide range of comparative projects and assessments. Such intercultural working could promote critical reflection on deeper issues such as wealth, power, interdependency, and resource sharing.

### Curriculum

Moralised compassion could also operate at curricular level across disciplines. One way in which we might cultivate compassionate regard is to use the imaginative or 'suggestive capacities' of literature (Zamir, 2007, p. 11). At best, literature enables us to imagine not just ourselves but the 'other'. And so, sometimes, literature can encourage us to [re]imagine or [re]conceive our own beliefs or attitudes, can allow us to explore our hidden selves and also the experience of characters in situations different from our own, and whose point of view or angle of vision is vastly different from our own. Reading to cultivate a sensibility which is open to the 'otherness' of the world, which encourages 'vigorous conversation' (Booth, 1988, p. 136), catalysing us to question our own hegemonies. Our own 'truths' can not only augment the role of universities in cultivating personal development and 'civilising us'



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through contact with the aesthetic, but can also be a way of growing moralised compassion as we become more aware of the realities of inequality.

The imaginative intensity of literature and all art forms also offer an illumination of what is irreducibly universal in the human condition: love, anger, fear, hate, compassion and justice, thus relating to that constituent of moralised compassion – ‘similar possibilities’. All this was known a generation or so ago; medical and engineering students were obliged to take modules or courses in the Humanities. Now, we invent new fields like Medical Humanities to elevate this illuminating inter-disciplinarity as an innovative pedagogic and research domain.

To catalyse the understanding and respect for both how different the lives of others are and how ‘similar possibilities’ might shape our fates, our outlooks, we would propose a new modality: ‘intereading’. Confining ourselves for a moment to literary texts, we would propose that, initially, within the field of literature, scholars and students from the global north and south would produce multivocal, multiperspectival analyses of the same text. This draws upon academic literature on voicing and autoethnography, but also upon literary texts such as Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim – Two-Birds* (1939), where contrapuntal ‘voices’ constitute a postmodernist reality – contradictory and polyvalent. This could be achieved in lectures through the use of technologies such as skype and video conferencing and involving scholars and students from the global north and global south, variously interpreting the same text. The exposure of difference, of misprision, would be evident, the size, blamelessness and similar possibilities might be more evident through the painfully and comically compounding ironies that literature so often offers. But, from such revelation, such imaginative illumination, might also emerge some commonality, some fellow-feeling, some mutuality of respect and the need for justice.

Following on from our suggestion that more student work could operate through knowledge exchange and cooperation between students in the global north and south, as an enactment of moralised compassion and from our argument that literature (as one example of arts based approaches), could help enact moralised compassion through interdisciplinary pedagogy, we would also argue for intereading, not just within literature, but across disciplines.

### Moralised compassion: Some global implications

To conclude, we offer some tentative suggestions about how moralised compassion could be enacted more globally to help give meaning to the concept of the engaged university. Returning to the three-stranded mission espoused by most universities in the global north, from the perspective of an emphasis on training for a global economy, it might be argued that, at the most cynical level, a grounding in the realities of the global south might be useful in the global market. Economic realities are shifting; how well will training for a western dominated labour market fare in a global world where the power balance has changed?

In terms of the mission of universities as civilising, there are increasing challenges to canonical culture. There are emerging, alternative canons to the indomitable western models. In a short paper such as this, we must grossly oversimplify, but it is evident that there is a significant opposition to the historical imposition of western canons in some parts of the world. More promisingly, though under considerable besiegement from both extremes, is the emergence of concepts such as cultural diversity and, perhaps more timely and momentous, the concept of interculturality. Such a concept inherently rejects polar oppositions and recognises both the pain of riven identity and the potentiality of multiple, polyvalent identities and an imaginative negotiation with the ‘other’ within ourselves and beyond our selves. Thus, interculturality, as we understand it, chimes with all three constituents of moralised compassion; it offers an understanding of the size or scale of the painful conflict of competing identities, it acknowledges that a fracture of identity, private and public, is blameless in that every person should be afforded the respect to strive for the life that many of us enjoy. And, contingently, that we acknowledge that many of us were, to borrow from the Northern Irish poet, John Hewitt (1979, p. 33), ‘once alien here’. This allows us to imagine similar possibilities.

Earlier in this paper we invoked literature as an example among art forms which enables an imaginative dwelling within the situation not just of people like ourselves, but of a capacious insight into the lives of people whose values and situations are quite different, even inimical, but with whom, through the connective power of art, we may identify. That is to say, literature allows us to discover unexpected similar possibilities. Literature, and all art forms, it must be said, inevitably reflects, sometimes supports, hegemonies – western and eastern, global south and global north. But most literature inclines towards criticality, often indirectly, by simply, and not so simply, imagining the lives of others, the scale and size of their unequal struggles, and their blamelessness.

Most importantly, the great writers from every culture are great because they offer compassion for the human condition, whether tragically or comically, giving value and voice to they who have suffered greatly, they who are blameless and they who are, after all, like ourselves. But they do this through great stories, beautiful images, not through polemics, ideologies or mission statements. Surely that is the core of any university’s claim to be a civilising influence: to help us towards the Protean dynamic not just of imagining our shaky, precarious selves – but imagining the lives of others.

That, in turn, may propel greater imagining of the third declared mission of many global north universities. Vice-chancellors, year after year, exhort the graduands to go out into the world and benefit society. We have suggested earlier that the journey needs to begin very much further back, to consider fundamental issues such as access. The inequality of access in both the global north and south could be tackled by a more imaginative consideration of the ‘opportunity costs’ resulting from the exclusion of countless talented and motivated potential students. A greater exercise of moralised compassion would result in an expansion of the talent pool; and concomitantly, an expansion of the knowledge and skills base available globally.



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There are, we suggest, a number of practical ways in which moralised compassion could be enacted centering on digital modalities. Prestige western journals could allow for the income differential and offer online subscriptions at a more affordable rate to their colleagues in less privileged countries. Western scholars could make greater efforts to include scholars from the global south and east in 'virtual' research projects, not just as a tokenistic form of 'pity', but because their insights would be immensely valuable. Our idea of intrereading is just one way of considering how a range of global insights can be syncretised to create greater critical mass and more nuanced understandings. Universities in the west and north could offer greater face to face support to their international students and online support to their colleagues across the globe in connecting with major journals and, equally, western scholars could publish more, ideally collaboratively, in global south journals creating a rich community of scholarship and enabling cutting edge research to be more widely accessible. There are, of course, other problems - the blocking of certain sites in certain countries, for example. Perhaps that is something which governments could consider, if only in terms of the politics of trade deals.

And finally, we may reflect that, in relation to moralised compassion, historically, universities have often led the way. Universities have undoubtedly been sites for public engagement on key issues, for example, through Civil Rights movements around the world. In America the privileged denizens of academe supported the grassroots campaigns of their Black fellow citizens. In Northern Ireland, a number of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement were students at Queen's University, notably Bernadette Devlin (McAliskey) and Eamonn McCann. Perhaps it is time for students, teachers, and all those involved in universities, to become, once again, a humanising voice which listens, hears, and imaginatively dwells on the reality of the marginalised and excluded, which speaks to power about injustice and articulates a moralised compassion before a time comes when universities become 'fake', 'bad', and 'swamped'.

## Biographies

*Tess Maginess* is a senior lecturer in Queen's University, Belfast. A national teaching fellow, her expertise is in literature, innovative pedagogies and arts based approaches with adult learners, especially non-traditional learners. In addition, she has published on inter-disciplinary approaches, including medical humanities.

*Alison MacKenzie* is a lecturer in Special Needs Education, Queen's University, Belfast. Her interests lie within philosophy of education and the philosophy of emotions, with a particular interest in compassion. Her interests also include epistemic injustice and epistemologies of ignorance. Before entering academia she was secondary school teacher in Scotland.

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